

SCOTLAND'S CASTLES: USE THEM OR LOSE THEM

Outcomes Report by Built Environment Forum Scotland

About This Report

Overview: On 9 October 2025, the Scottish Castles Association, supported by Historic Environment Scotland (HES), held a national conference on 'Scotland's Castles: Use Them or Lose Them'. This was followed by a workshop, facilitated by Built Environment Forum Scotland (BEFS) on 10 October, which invited a smaller focussed group to explore the key findings from the conference, seeking a clear consensus towards action.

The events, held at the Engine Shed in Stirling, brought together stakeholders with an interest in castles and historic buildings, asking how to more effectively work with the spatial planning system towards improved understanding and action in restoring and reusing these important national assets.

The well-attended conference featured contributions from across the heritage sector and beyond, including restorers, planners, historians, craftspeople, conservation professionals, policy-makers, academics, building owners and castle enthusiasts.

Keynote presentations included representatives from Historic Environment Scotland, the National Trust for Scotland, the Landmark Trust, the King's Foundation, in addition to restorers, expert researchers and international commentators. The presentations, panel discussions and breakout groups enabled a deep consideration of challenges and opportunities around planning system experience, restoration and reuse, climate change, community benefits and more. Presentations and key takeaways from the discussions at the conference formed the basis of the workshop the following day, facilitated by Built Environment Forum Scotland.



This report summarises the experiences, ideas and contributions shared at the conference, and presents the main consensus points and conclusions reached at the workshop. These outcomes will be taken forward by the Scottish Castles Association, seeking practical steps as to how the planning process can be demystified and applied, to more effectively secure good outcomes and a sustainable future for Scotland's castles.

Consensus Points

The main areas of agreement across all conference and workshop sessions:

- **Inconsistency** – of planning system engagement in different regions. Much of this is down to limited capacity in planning authorities, which requires a pipeline of new planners, conservation officers etc.
- **Information for potential buyers** – as we think more about attracting private investment and developing sustainable economic uses, buyers should be provided with better information, guidance and support around planning issues, e.g. clarifying access rights.
- **Practical help** – what is needed is not a new 'one size fits all' standardised national policy or framework specific to castles, but better sharing of existing information, guidance, case studies, and peer sharing of experiences between owners. People don't know what they don't know.
- **Evidence-based solutions** – for example, on the most effective energy adaptations for different types of buildings. Good quality evidence requires investment in research and professional fees
- **Responsive policy-making** – national policies should be quicker in keeping up with emerging technologies and appropriate retrofit solutions. Swift guidance is needed in building control in particular
- **Front-load support** – prospective private and community group owners should be provided with more information and support up-front, including signposting to advice and funding sources, access to conservation expertise, and highlighting risks such as rising insurance premiums



Conclusions: Action Points

The workshop created several specific suggestions for follow-up action, supported by strong consensus:

- **New guidance** – Historic Environment Scotland and/or the Scottish Castles Association could provide bespoke planning guidance for castles and historic buildings, updated to the current context - including signposting to what guidance is already out there.
- **Route map/choose your journey** – process and signposting support, who to go to, and when. What information do people need? Expectation setting at pre-application stage and in conservation plan.
- **Make the case** – as one participant noted, "A conservation plan will save time and money in the long run."
- **Framework/toolkit or resource:** e.g. a "10 things to consider if buying a castle" online resource.

Next Steps

BEFS suggests that a short life working group be considered, to take forward any agreed actions emerging from the two days.

BEFS has greatly appreciated the opportunity to be involved in this project thus far and is keen to explore how best to further support the Scottish Castles Association as it develops recommendations and outcomes.

Report produced by Built Environment Forum Scotland (Hazel Johnson, Derek Rankine, Jonna Meredith) for the Scottish Castles Association.

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